

## **Transcription: Steve Miller**

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*Today is Wednesday, February 29<sup>th</sup>, Leap Day, 2012. My name is James Crabtree, and this afternoon I'll be interviewing Mr. Steve Miller. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Miller is at his home in Brenham, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today, and to add your story to our archive.*

**Steve Miller:** My pleasure.

*Yes sir. Thank you very much. Sir, the first question I always like to start with is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the military.*

**Steve Miller:** Okay. I was born and reared in Terre Haute, Indiana, and I lived there until I graduated from high school. Then I moved to Arizona and went to college in Arizona. My mother and dad had a business there, the hotel business. So I stayed there, went to college and worked in the hotel until I went in the service in 1967.

*In '67. Were you still in college or had you graduated from college?*

**Steve Miller:** I finished two years.

*Finished two years, and were you drafted or was it something you signed up to do?*

**Steve Miller:** It was the pressure of the draft and girlfriends and parents and I needed to get away so this was the opportunity for me to . . . I ignored the two-year draft. I went right for the Navy for four years.

*How was it in terms of the draft? Did you already have a number assigned and you thought you were getting close?*

**Steve Miller:** Yes.

*Explain to us, sir, how that process works. I think a lot of people that didn't live through that era don't really understand exactly how the draft was run.*

**Steve Miller:** Well, you had a number, selective service number, and it was assigned to you when you turned 18. And you got a deferment while you were in college. I was close to my number being called, and I just decided I would rather go into the Navy so I signed up for the Navy.

*What was it that attracted to the Navy?*

**Steve Miller:** I guess I wanted to . . . I had heard a lot about the Navy, and they had good training programs, and they had an opportunity you could either be a sailor or sign up for the airdale side of the Navy, and I chose the airdale.

*So this is in 1967 so the war's going on in Vietnam . . .*

**Steve Miller:** That's correct.

*Where's the first place that they sent you to?*

**Steve Miller:** I spent, with my college experience and what I went through in basic, they put me at Pensacola, Florida. And I worked in flight training. And then I was dispatched to a smaller unit called NAS Whiting Field in Milton, Florida, where we trained pilots in a T-28. And I was in charge of all the flight books, and I kept graphic charts for the commanding officer. And I had to have them in his office at 8 a.m. every morning that there were flights.

*What were those charts, what were those like 'cause this was in the . . . I assume you weren't really using computers at that time.*

**Steve Miller:** No, no, there were no computers. I had the old tape charts, you know. You use X-ACTO knives and you would tape little pieces of tape on charts, the flight hours over this period of time compared to the other period of time. He had several different charts that he looked at which gave him information.

*And this was in Pensacola?*

**Steve Miller:** Well, no, it was actually in Whiting Field.

*Whiting Field, okay.*

**Steve Miller:** Which is about 30 miles north of Pensacola.

*At that point, what type of aircraft were they flying primarily where you were?*

**Steve Miller:** Well, we were training in T-28s.

*That's right. You mentioned that. Yes sir. So how long did you end up spending there at . . . ?*

**Steve Miller:** I was there two years.

*Two years, okay. Was it something that you enjoyed? Were you glad that you had picked the Navy?*

**Steve Miller:** Oh yes. It was very rewarding. I had a job with responsibility and I enjoyed it. I was able to coach the ensigns. Sometimes they thought their flight books were not really important but they didn't realize they were not ready to graduate if their flight books were in a mess. So, I was on top of that, and I kept a lot of students from flunking out 'cause I had to ride their you-know-what.

*Sure. How often was a new class of aviators coming through where you were?*

**Steve Miller:** About every eight to 10 weeks.

*So I imagine there was pretty busy schedule for you then?*

**Steve Miller:** You bet.

*So you did the two years there. Where did you go at that point? Is that when you were sent to Vietnam?*

**Steve Miller:** I was . . . You know they send you a card that says what kind of billet you're going to be in, and mine was military attaché duty. And I thought, "Oh boy, this is great." You know, I'm going to get embassy duty or go to DC. And then when I got my orders, it was to Vietnam, and I had 12 weeks training I had to go through at San Diego, California. And I was the Naval advisory officer.

*What type of training did they put you through?*

**Steve Miller:** I had to learn Vietnamese history, cultures, customs. I had to learn to speak their language. I had to go through escape and evasion which was one week, and that was tough. You know, they put you out in an area and you have to keep from getting caught. In the end they catch everybody. They put you in a mock prisoner of war camp, and that really gets your attention because they do things to you that are done to people that are prisoners of war, the water boarding and they put people in coffins and throw dirt on the coffin to make you feel like you're being buried, you know? It was gruesome, and they slap you around. But it was good training, and I'm glad I had it before going over there.

*How much of the language were you able to pick up during that training?*

**Steve Miller:** Very minimal. I was able to communicate, you know. I couldn't sit there and chatter with 'em but I could pick up, I could make sentences, and I . . . They knew what I wanted to tell 'em.

*That's pretty impressive though 'cause it's quite a different language from English.*

**Steve Miller:** Oh exactly, exactly. But if you asked me to say something now, I probably couldn't. That was a long time ago.

*Yes sir. So you go through this training and you know that you're going to be going over. You kind of, I guess, have an idea in your mind what you'll be doing. But what were you thinking before you headed over there 'cause I know in the United States, the Vietnam War was getting a lot of horrible coverage. And you knew you were going into that so tell us what your thoughts were at that point.*

**Steve Miller:** The feeling was, you know, why are we over there? But, you know, our commanding officer said, "We are going over there and we're here to do a job, and we do it." You know? Have faith in our country and our leaders.

*What were your personal feelings though? Did you feel afraid or were you anxious, excited? Was it a sense of you wanted to get over there so you could it done quickly?*

**Steve Miller:** I wanted to be afraid, and quite frankly, I was scared. But I just kept, you know, keep my faith and the good Lord's on my side, and he wants me to be there, I'll be there. If I have to be killed, I'll be killed. You know, I just had my faith.

*When did you arrive in Vietnam? Do you remember the day?*

**Steve Miller:** It was hot. It was in August I believe. I don't know the exact date but it was 1970.

*And they sent you over on a jet?*

**Steve Miller:** Yes, we had commercial airlines to go over.

*Where did you arrive?*

**Steve Miller:** Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, Saigon.

*What were your first impressions?*

**Steve Miller:** Why am I here? No, I was, and this was the first time I had been in an Asian country, and I was very interested to see what it was like and how people lived. I was excited but I was scared at the same time.

*So tell us a little bit about the unit that you were assigned to.*

**Steve Miller:** Well, I was assigned to the Navy base in a little village called Nha Be which is about 12 miles south of Saigon. And then I was detached from there to a Marine division outside the base, and that's where my Naval advisory duties came in. I was supply officer for the squadron, and we had our Vietnamese counterparts, and my job was to train this young man in supplies, you know. How to pick supplies, how to inventory them, and how to disperse them, and how to be responsible for them.

*Did you find that you were able to do very well with communicating and with teaching that, your South Vietnamese counterpart?*

**Steve Miller:** I had no problem. They were glad, the ones that I had were glad we were there, and the mama sans and the people that worked with us, they were . . . They cooked for us and cleaned for us, and they were just wonderful people but they all had been cleared through the United States government.

*What was a typical day like for you over there if there was such a thing?*

**Steve Miller:** Well, we had approximately 25 Marines, and they would go out on maneuvers every day, out in the riverboats. Occasionally I had to go with them. And they were a good team. It was hard. I know PTSD was prevalent even there, but nobody knew what that was at the time 'cause they had seen so many terrible, terrible things, myself included. But they would go out and they'd come back.

*They primarily just patrolled the river area?*

**Steve Miller:** Right. And they had a lot of action because this area was called the Rung Sat Special Zone where the '68 Tet Offensive was real heavy. So, yes, there was some real hard times. I slept with my M16 and my .45. It didn't get two feet away from me at all times.

*Sure. So how big was the base, the outpost base that you were on? I know you said 25 Marines.*

**Steve Miller:** Right. We had a barracks and an office space, and then we had . . . We actually did very well because we got new quarters. The Seabees built us new quarters, and we had showers, nice showers and sleeping quarters. I mean they were . . . It was nice compared to what other soldiers had.

*Sure, because you were pretty much a forward outpost then.*

**Steve Miller:** Right.

*How many men total did you have residing in that outpost?*

**Steve Miller:** Well, there was 25 grunts and then there's about four or five officers, major being the most senior. We had a chief corpsman and myself.

*How many South Vietnamese were with you?*

**Steve Miller:** They didn't live with us. They had quarters elsewhere. But there was about 15.

*Fifteen of them, so it really is a small place you were. How far were you from the next outpost or base?*

**Steve Miller:** Well, Saigon.

*Saigon, so about 12 miles you said?*

**Steve Miller:** Right.

*What was that like being out there in a situation like that? Did you get a lot of indirect fire in your position?*

**Steve Miller:** Yes. There was a point in time when I was afraid to even take the road to Saigon because they were mined a lot. So we had to be very careful.

*Sure. Now during this time, were you married or engaged?*

**Steve Miller:** No. I was single at that time.

*You were single. Did you write to your folks back home though and tell them kind of where you were and what was going on?*

**Steve Miller:** Yes. In fact, I was kind of a lazy streak. I wasn't much for writing 'cause my penmanship was not the best, so I taped. I taped a letter once a week and sent the tape home. And they really enjoyed it, and they did the same to me. That way we got to hear each other's voices and it was a lot better. Took a lot of pictures back and forth.

*Did you tell them about all the situation you were in or did you try to shelter some of that?*

**Steve Miller:** No, I sheltered it. In fact, that was my major problem for 40 years. I sheltered it all, kept it in, and I'm just now . . . I got to PTS group meetings every Thursday at College Station.

*Tell us, you were there for, how long did you spend there at that one particular outpost?*

**Steve Miller:** A little over a year.

*A year at that post, yeah.*

**Steve Miller:** Then I was discharged.

*Okay, and that was in '71?*

**Steve Miller:** Right.

*What were some of the things that stand out to you most about your time there, good or bad?*

**Steve Miller:** The bad was, I had to go on a lot of helicopter flights, chopper flights I mean, and I had to assist with the wounded and dead, and that was very traumatic on me. And responsible for packaging personal belongings up, taking 'em to consulate. I don't talk about it much. I'm able to say that much.

*Sure. What about the men you served with? Tell us a little bit about the men that were with you.*

**Steve Miller:** Well, they were boys. I was the oldest, you know, so they were boys. They were taking it very hard. You know, they were mostly 18 years old. They were just out of high school.

*Sure, and how old were you at that point?*

**Steve Miller:** I was 23 or 24.

*Okay, and then who was the senior person there? You weren't the senior person at the post, were you?*

**Steve Miller:** No, no. We had a major, Marine Corps major. He was the oldest, and our chief petty officer was \_\_, you know, lifer. We called it lifer. But he was real good. He knew how to dispense drugs and moderately.

*Now the time you were there, did you spend an entire year there or were you given an R&R break at some point?*

**Steve Miller:** Oh, I had an R&R break, yes.

*Where did you go for R&R?*

**Steve Miller:** Hawaii.

*Hawaii, okay. Was that difficult to do that and then come back?*

**Steve Miller:** Yes. It was a taste of freedom, you know. But I had a good time. I made the most of it, and, you know, had to respect my responsibilities and go back.

*I think I might have asked you this already but was there such a thing as a typical day at that post where you were?*

**Steve Miller:** A typical day was, you know, getting up and getting ready and eating some of the mamasan's delicious cooking. And I would line up duties for the Vietnamese counterpart, and then we would go to different . . . I would go to his place and we'd work with their inventory there. I bought supplies in Saigon.

*Tell us a little bit about Saigon, what that was like.*

**Steve Miller:** Beautiful city. You know the French dominated Vietnam for a long time. Of course, the only good thing they did was bring French onion soup, French bread, and wine. And French plateaus, a lot of beautiful French plateaus. The scenery is beautiful. Vietnam is a beautiful country. In fact, if they ever stop fighting over there, it could be a tourist attraction. A lot of beautiful scenery, beautiful jungles. It's really a beautiful country.

*At that time in Saigon, were you able to move around pretty freely within the city? When you were there, did you have a chance to eat in different restaurants and that sort of thing?*

**Steve Miller:** Yes, at times. There were times when they said, "It's not safe," you know, but they had their communiqué. Our counterparts, you know, saying, "Stay out of Saigon for a while." But we did get to enjoy the village and the town and, you know, go to their markets. Yes, we did get to enjoy that on occasion.

*So in some ways it broke up the monotony a little bit too, I guess.*

**Steve Miller:** Exactly.

*You weren't just at the little forward operating post for that entire year.*

**Steve Miller:** Exactly. Like I said, the military, the U.S. military kept everything pretty safe there to the best of their ability. We didn't really come under a lot of major attacks. They would just sneak in landmines and . . .

*I'm trying to picture in my mind what that forward operating base looked like. How big was it, do you think, in terms of a radius? Was it set up kind of in a circle?*

**Steve Miller:** Just our complex? Or are you talking about . . .

*Yeah, where you were with the 25 or so Marines, and . . .*

**Steve Miller:** The size of the building?

*I'm picturing you out 12 miles from Saigon. Were you linked in with other nearby posts, or were you kind of out there?*

**Steve Miller:** Yeah, we were like 100 kilometers from the Navy base. So we were pretty close. But we were outside the gates.

*That's why I guess I'm asking. Was it a circular type of . . .?*

**Steve Miller:** Yeah, we were outside the Navy compound so we were susceptible to sneak.

*So you had wire and you had fighting positions and outposts and 24-hour sentry and that sort of thing?*

**Steve Miller:** Right. But it was just a tin building, and had a false parapet front, and just a typical little village building.

*And how far were the South Vietnamese forces from you that you trained with, were supposed to train?*

**Steve Miller:** Oh, they were within walking distance.

*Okay, so they were very close to you.*

**Steve Miller:** Right.

*So your whole job that entire time was really to assist them and help them, in theory, start running their own supplies without your aid?*

**Steve Miller:** Right, counsel the Marines. A lot of them had a hard time, you know, the first time away from home and still a kid. They grow up fast.

*How many of those Marines do you think were draftees or did you ever know?*

**Steve Miller:** No, a lot of 'em joined 'cause they were all Marines, and so I would say 90 percent of 'em were . . .

*Volunteers?*

**Steve Miller:** Volunteers, yeah. 'Cause they don't get drafted in the Marines Corps. You gotta wanna be in the Marine Corps.

*Well, but they did draft people into the Marine Corps in Vietnam. So that's what I was wondering, if you could tell or if you knew who was a draftee and who was . . .*

**Steve Miller:** Like I said, there was about 90 percent of 'em were volunteers, and probably other 10 percent were drafted.

*At what point did you realize that you were getting close to being able to go home? Did you kind of know when your discharge was going to be up?*

**Steve Miller:** Oh, we had a calendar. We marked the days off. That's what helps get through the day.

*So in your case, you found that keeping track of the days helped you?*

**Steve Miller:** Yes.

*I know some folks that, you know, the last thing they wanted to do was to know the day because it would be too depressing or too far away.*

**Steve Miller:** No, we did. We were timing ourselves to getting out of there, and hoping everybody would stay alive. We lost about, I would say, six soldiers the time I was there, and out of our own division in a year's time.

*Now at the point where you started really . . . When did you start thinking of yourself as a short-timer?*

**Steve Miller:** After I got back from R&R.

*Okay, which was how long?*



**Steve Miller:** R&R was a week.

*I mean how long did you have left?*

**Steve Miller:** Oh, I had about five months.

*About five months, okay.*

**Steve Miller:** I was always praying for an early release.

*Sure. And when you got towards the last week or so, did you go out much on any sort of patrols?*

**Steve Miller:** No. I stayed pretty close to home.

*So tell us about that last day. Does that stand out in your mind, the last day you were there in Vietnam or the last day at the post?*

**Steve Miller:** I sat back and I went over what I had done for the whole year, and my accomplishments, my failures, and talked to the major 'cause I kinda wanted an "Atta boy, how you doing" type thing. And I received the Navy Achievement Medal for my services there.

*Okay, that's great. And your successor, he already arrived?*

**Steve Miller:** Yes.

*So what was some advice you gave him before you left?*

**Steve Miller:** Keep an open mind. Keep the faith. Do your job.

*Once you left that, I keep calling it a forward operating base because, I don't know, what did you call it where you were? Was there a term for it or a name for it?*

**Steve Miller:** A village post.

*Just a village post, okay. When you left that village post, did you go into Saigon at that point?*

**Steve Miller:** Went to Saigon. Our flight took off out of Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base.

*Pretty much that same day?*

**Steve Miller:** Right.

*What was that feeling like for you?*

**Steve Miller:** Awesome, awesome. "We're outta here."

*Yeah. Kind of the freedom . . .*

**Steve Miller:** "God, please don't let anything happen."

*Sure. So you fly back and where do they take you to, to Hawaii?*

**Steve Miller:** Yes, I flew to Hawaii and then from Hawaii direct to Houston.

*On to Houston.*

**Steve Miller:** I was discharged out of Houston.

*So you were really, it was like that. You were . . . You didn't have any time left at any other base or anything?*

**Steve Miller:** No, we were through. I had served all my time, and it was really quick. I didn't have any waiting periods. I got my money right away.

*So this was in 1971?*

**Steve Miller:** Right.

*Okay. What was it like for you to finally be back home?*

**Steve Miller:** Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. I had some adjusting to do, and, you know, "Here we are," "What do I do?" "Gotta go get a job," you know, and see friends. It had some adjustment periods. There were times when, especially when we were getting mistreated as far as being Vietnam vets. That was very, very hard, and it just, you know, "Why are we going through this? We were doing what we were told to do."

*Did you make the decision to stay in Texas at that point? I know you said you flew back to Houston.*

**Steve Miller:** Yes. I was in the hotel business and I stayed there, put my time in, and then I moved to . . . About 20 years ago I moved to the country.

*Out to Brenham?*

**Steve Miller:** Yes.

*That's great.*

**Steve Miller:** Well, actually a little town called Burton which is 12 miles west on 290 of Brenham. I mean Austin.

*Sure. Did you keep in touch with any of the men you served with in Vietnam?*

**Steve Miller:** Yes, maybe for 60 days and then it just kinda dwindled. I mean, you know, everybody had their thing to do, and it was . . . And I'm sorry now, I wished we'd kept it up but it's just one of those things. We just, everybody got to doing their own thing and lost track of everybody.

*Have you ever tried to locate any of them or find any reunion groups or things of that sort?*

**Steve Miller:** No. I look in the Vietnam veterans magazine and also the Legion. I'm a Legionnaire. In fact, I'm commander of the post here in Brenham.

*Okay. So then you know John Breeden, I guess.*

**Steve Miller:** Oh, yes, very well. Just saw him this morning.

*Yeah, I know he's past national commander. I've been involved with Boys State for a number of years and he always comes to Boys State every year and talks and that sort of thing.*

**Steve Miller:** Right. In fact, I'm in charge of Americanism here in Brenham and we got 16 boys lined up, but we only send 12, I think, and then we have a couple alternates.

*It's a great program.*

**Steve Miller:** Oh, it is. It's just wonderful. The kids have such a good time.

*That's right. Well, sir, I know, I think I had mentioned to you but with this program, we have two goals behind it. One is to archive these stories for posterity because we have archives here at the Land Office that go back to the 1600s. We have the original registro that Stephen F. Austin kept in his own hand of the settlers that came to Texas. We have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo. So our goal is to add all these interviews to the archives so that people can listen to them hundreds of years from now. And then also the other side is this is a way of us, small way of us saying thank you to you and other veterans for your service to our nation. And I know especially when you talk about Vietnam and the number of Vietnam veterans I've interviewed that have told me that the homecomings really weren't there.*

**Steve Miller:** Right, they weren't.

*Really the horror stories of mistreatment, and so hopefully in a small way this is a way of at least the State of Texas thanking you for your service. Because what we'll do in a couple weeks is we'll make copies of this interview on CDs and we'll mail those to you along with a letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson. And then also if you have any photographs or anything like that that you'd want us to put on the website or put in your file, you can always mail those to me. I'll put my card in the package that we send you. But if you have anything like that, we can always scan those photographs or documents, whatever, and return them back to you.*

**Steve Miller:** Yeah, that would be great.

*We can put them on the website. But, sir, with the posterity in mind, you know, thinking of somebody maybe listening to this interview long after you and I are both gone, is there anything you might want to say to them listening a hundred years from now?*

**Steve Miller:** Only that, you know, we were glad to serve our country. Whether it was right or wrong, we served our country with pride, and we'd do it again in a Yankee second.

*Yes sir. Well, sir, I really appreciate you taking some time out of your day today to talk to us.*

**Steve Miller:** My pleasure.

*And tell us a little bit about your story, and especially with you being involved with the American Legion there, please let any other veterans you know, let them know about this program because that's how we find these interviews. It's all really just word of mouth and folks contacting us and telling us, "Hey, you need to interview such and such."*

**Steve Miller:** I can thank Jim Rothermel for this. You know Jim?

*Yes sir. I remember interviewing him.*

**Steve Miller:** He's the one said, "Miller, get your hat. Send in that card."

*That's great. Well, same thing. If you know anybody like he did, then please let them know because we're always eager to interview veterans all throughout Texas.*

**Steve Miller:** Excellent. Well certainly. We got some new people coming in, and we'll get some Iraqi comments.

*That would be great. And then, sir, like I said, I'll put my card in . . .*

**Steve Miller:** Can you send me some more brochures?

*Absolutely. I'll put some of those in there as well.*

**Steve Miller:** Yeah, that would be great.

*All right, sir. Well, thank you very much. And, again, it was very nice talking to you.*

**Steve Miller:** Thank you.

*Yes sir. Take care.*

**Steve Miller:** You bet.

*Bye bye.*

**Steve Miller:** Bye bye.